DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 589 CS 505 173

AUTHOR Rasmuson, Todd J.
TITLE The Competitive Atmosphere: Its Effects on Forensic Speeches.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (71st, Denver, CO, November 7-10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Competition; Higher Education; Motivation Techniques; *Persuasive Discourse; *Public Speaking; Speech Communication; Speeches; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Contests; *Speech Events

ABSTRACT

By exploring the relationship between competition theory and forensic speech contests, three benefits can be clearly identified: (1) students learn communication theory, (2) students who most accurately follow what is taught are awarded, and (3) students modify speeches by studying judges' comments, imitating winners, and utilizing selective innovation. Among the positive effects of the competitive atmosphere are students' attempts to excel, because only one speech receives a first place award and the winner must strive to improve in order to remain a winner. However, more research is needed in this area in order to determine whether the effects of competition are primarily positive or are in fact negative. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED265589

The Competitive Atmosphere: Its Effects on Forensic Speeches

By Todd J. Rasmuson
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND

Presented as part of a National Forensic Association Panel at the Speech Communication Association National Convention, Denver, Colorado, November 7-10, 1985.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Todd Rasmuson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS505173

Abstract

Past research has attempted to show a relationship between competition and learning as well as how a competitive atmosphere affects human behavior. In this study, competition theory is related to public speaking. After a discussion of the competitive process in forensics, specific effects of competition are examined. If the focus of competitive speaking is intrinsic and based on the acquisition of competence, competition can provide a learning environment that is also enjoyable.

The Competitive Atmosphere:
Its Effects on Forensic Speeches

Competition theory is not a new research area for social theorists and psychologists; but with regard to competitive speaking, this is not the case. Providing students with many opportunities to apply and learn communicative skills seems to be a worthy idea, and competition can serve as an extension for theory learned in the classroom. Whereas competition could help students polish communication skills, it can also promote styles or techniques that may not be taught in communication coursework. To better understand the competitive atmosphere in forensic speaking, the effects should be examined in order to benefit both the classroom and forensics. As Margaret Clifford noted in 1971: ". . .it would seem both profitable and practical to research in greater detail the effects of competition both as a prevailing atmosphere resulting from the present educational and cultural patterns and as specific motivational treatments which may be used in classroom situations" (15).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of the competitive atmosphere found at individual events tournaments. The author contends that competition provides students with a successful and enjoyable method to apply communication theory. Forensic competition can be examined by first discussing the nature of competition, secondly explaining the competitive speaking process, and finally

outlining specific effects.

THE NATURE OF COMPETITION

Margaret Clifford defined competition as ". . .a situation in which subjects are encouraged to surpass each other but are unable to directly affect the absolute score of their competitors" (12). This definition accurately applies to the forensic atmosphere as individual competitors are primarily concerned with their own performance but are unable to directly influence others. However, the relationship between competitors is a definite consideration. David and Roger Johnson explain: "Under purely competitive conditions, an individual can obtain his goal if, and only if, the others with whom he is linked cannot obtain their goals" ("Instructional" 214).

Besides the relationship to other competitors, central to the competitive atmosphere are the reinforcement strategies in effect (Scott and Cherrington 748). In 1981, Deci et. al. discussed the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and their relation to competition:

> Intrinsic motivation is generally distinguished from extrinsic motivation on the basis of the reward that is associated with the activity. The reward for intrinsically motivated behavior is the feeling of competence and self-determination that is associated with the behavior. The reward for extrinsically motivated behavior is something that

is separate from and follows behavior. (79)

Extrinsic rewards could be trophies, applause, recognition, qualifying to national tournaments, advancing into finals, or receiving a first place rank. Intrinsically, forensics can provide improvements in communication skills and self-confidence. Deci et. al. claim that the extrinsic aspects of competition become more salient than people's intrinsic motivation (80). The authors qualify their stance claiming that: "This does not mean that competition does not motivate and it does not discredit competition. It simply helps to clarify the nature of the motivational processes which are involved with competition" (83).

COMPETITIVE SPEAKING PROCESS

Competition can positively and negatively influence a learning environment, and unfortunately general theory cannot claim when competition will be beneficial. However, recognizing the relationship between competitors, the desire for awards and competence, and how these ideas relate to forensics; we can more accurately assess the effects of the competitive atmosphere. The process of competitive speaking can be examined in three steps:

1. Students learn communication theory.
2. Students, who most accurately follow what is taught, will be awarded.
3. Speeches are modified by studying judges' comments, imitating winners, and utilizing selective

innovation. The process returns to step one as students are learning communication theory, and this cyclical pattern continues.

The initial step in the process is addressed in the classroom or by a forensic coach. In either case, the student is taught the basics in speech structure and in oral interpretation. For example, in impromptu speaking the student becomes familiar with how to structure ideas following the format: introduction, body and conclusion. Without a knowledge of the communication "essentials," the student will have trouble continuing the competitive process. The first step exemplifies individualistic competition whereas the student is actually competing with him/herself. The emphasis is not on defeating other competitors but in mastering the application of communication theory. When forensics is viewed in this light, learning becomes more of a challenge without the need for identification of an enemy that needs to be beaten. In fact, forensic competition is not head to head battle, but in many ways is individualistic. Students attempt to write the best speech, find the best material, and perform flawlessly. If a student does not receive an award, responses should be in the direction of: "The speech was not strong enough," and not, "I lost." The student's most difficult competitor can be him/herself. Giving the best possible speech is a helpful guideline instead of "good enough to pick up a trophy," or in the classroom: "good enough to get an A." In the event impromptu speaking, this

is especially true. The speaker will not see other competitors before his/her speech, so the emphasis is on giving the best possible speech and not on defeating the other speakers. But whatever the event, learning the theory is a necessary first step.

Individualistic competition is vital to acquisition of theory, however the relationship to other competitors cannot be ignored. In step two, it is not necessarily the students who compete against each other; but actually their speeches. Judges will determine which speech best demonstrates communication precepts and award those that do so. Once again, the emphasis is not on the ideas that "this student lost," or "this student was the winner;" but instead "this speech was the strongest according to what is being taught," or "other speeches were stronger than this one." The focus is placed on speech quality, preparation, and performance and not on the speaker's self concept. While the extrinsic motivation of trophies contributes to the student's competitive drive and supplies definite reinforcement, intrinsic motivators have no specific end. A student could always be more competent; a speech could always be improved. In forensics, extrinsic rewards do provide students with specific goals, while at the same time they will have a long range intrinsic objective: competence.

The competitive environment motivates students to excel, but since only one speech receives a first place award, the vast majority of participants will be trying to improve for

the next tournament. Even the first place student may have to improve in order to stay ahead of the competition. In any case, modification of a speech plays a central role in competitive speaking, which is the third step in the process. One advantage that forensics has over classroom speaking is that students know which students are successful. In a noncompetitive class, direct comparison is not possible. Students rarely know which speeches received A's; and if two speeches were given A's, which one was better. The student relies on the comments from the instructor for improvement. Besides learning from judges' comments, students in competition are able to directly compare their own speech with others. As Johnson and Johnson point out: "Sometimes students may wish to compete in order to appraise their skills since competition is one way to make comparative judgments and to learn what one is really capable of doing" ("Instructional" 231). When a competitor does not gain the top award, improvements are considered; and since a student has the opportunity to see which competitors were successful, modeling or imitation is a viable option. According to Edward O'Connell Jr., subjects might conclude that imitation was truly the only way to insure a degree of success, so they may simply imitate their obviously competent models (181). Imitation can be used in all events for some improvements, and this is true for impromptu speaking as well. Structure, amount of preparation time, and movement during the speech can be imitated, to name only a few.

Unfortunately the answer to how students can best learn in a competitive atmosphere is not that easy. In competitive environments, simple imitation of a person receiving rewards would frequently result in the frustration of seeing that person consume the limited rewards available (O'Connell 173). Modeling a winning speech could result in a performance that is lower quality than the original being imitated. Therefore, a student must be somewhat innovative, as well. Many of the basic skills can be learned though imitation, but the competitive process would stagnate without new challenges and risks by the speakers. So, both imitation and innovation should be used to gain speaking competence. As Walker points out: "The competitor wishes to fulfill both his need to be special and distinctive and his need to be accepted and secure" (7).

THE EFFECTS OF COMPETITION ON FORENSIC SPEECHES

The competitive process in forensics is complex but by looking at the nature of competition, the three step process of learning, motivation, and modification; the effects of competition can be analyzed. Most importantly, past research has recognized the connection between competition and competence. Walker contends:

> To the extent that [competitors] understand themselves and improve their control of themselves, they will attain competence (control of their game), and competence leads to courage, creativity, and

fun. Lack of understanding and lack of control lead to fear, depression, and incompetence--and no fun. Competition is too good to waste. (xiv)

Forensics can teach communication through the application of material learned, and mastering the skills involved should be the primary concern. But just as vital as the desire for skill mastery is the need for enjoyment. "Students should master the skills to compete with enjoyment" (Johnson and Johnson Learning vi). According to Walker: ". . .champions find joy in the competition" (41). Champion, Jack Nicklaus says that at the age of ten he discovered that "hitting a ball well was a lot more fun than hitting it badly, which made me want to get better as soon as possible" (Walker 17). As Walker stated: "The game is fun--if it is played without excessive concern for the outcome. The acquisition and display of competence is fun. Winning is fun. And being part of the group is fun" (35).

Not everyone would agree with Walker's exuberance; in fact much of the research has pointed out negative aspects of competition. Herbert Gurnee, in 1968, tested college students as they found their way through a maze in either a competitive or cooperative situation. Gurnee found that: "Twenty-one of the 32 said they tried harder when competing, on the other hand, 22 subjects said they found collaborating more pleasant than competing while ten thought competing was more pleasant" (31). It is interesting to note that of the ten who enjoyed competing, all but one was a winner. It

comes as no surprise to note that competition is most enjoyable for the students who are winning. As Marvin Shaw discovered in 1958: "Competitive situations arouse a stronger motivation to achieve than cooperative situations" (167). However, competition also resulted in decreased interpersonal attraction (Scott and Cherrington 756) and an increase in anxiety (Johnson and Johnson "Instructional" 227-28).

A very relevant negative influence to forensics is hypothesized by Deci et. al.: ". . .in general the controlling aspect of competition will tend to undermine intrinsic motivation for the activity itself" (80). Students could easily view forensics as an instrument for winning rather than an activity which is mastery-oriented and rewarding in its own right. In 1980 Milton Rosenbaum and associates conducted a block building experiment where college students built structures in a competitive and cooperative atmosphere. In competition, the students were so concerned about being better as quick as possible, quality was sacrificed (Rosenbaum et. al. 634). This idea is supported by Shaw who also noticed that competition resulted in poorer performance (167). The same problem could occur in speaking competition. Students could strive to win so quickly that concern for competence would be secondary. Walker explains this potential problem: [Some competitors need] "to be approved first and to be competent second" (19).

Failure is an effect that is more common than success in a competitive environment. There is only one first place

trophy, and the person receiving it will most likely have other events where first place was not achieved. In any case, students must deal with this reality; and accepting criticism becomes a necessary attribute that is invaluable, as well.

CONCLUSION

Some competitors may find the negative effects to be too overwhelming and choose not to compete. In a study conducted by Steigleder, subjects manipulated a ball through a maze without having it fall into a hole. The experiment revealed that subjects would learn an instrumental response to offset competition (1299). Hopefully, avoidance is not always the answer when deciding when and if to compete, but competition will be viewed as an effective environment for gaining competence. There are definite negative effects; but with the right perspective on competition, learning can be successful and enjoyable.

Competition is not appropriate for every environment, and Johnson and Johnson state: "Most of the competition in classrooms is inappropriate" (vi), and yet the authors feel that: ". . .students should be taught the basic skills necessary to function in all three types of situations: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic" (213). Participating in competitive speaking activities outside the classroom does seem to be an excellent option for some college students. In 1982 Holloway reported that forensic

competition was successful at his college. The success was not due to the "emphasis on extrinsic rewards such as trophies, but most likely to formation of good student-teacher relationships, a productive organizational psycho-environment and careful teaching of public speaking fundamentals" (166). In this case, forensics was used to complement theory from the communication classroom, and students had a reasonable outlook on competition: "[Students] were successful, they said, because 'forensics was fun' and 'winning was considered unimportant'" (Holloway 168). Past research has shown competition as being a very positive learning environment on one hand, and as a situation that should be avoided on the other. The evidence suggests that to determine the worthiness of a competitive atmosphere, more research is required. Since there has not been any specific research conducted with regard to competition and forensics, many questions remain unanswered. Do students and coaches find the competitive atmosphere useful for learning? Is it enjoyable? Do intrinsic or extrinsic motivators dominate a student's desire to excel? Specifically what motivators are responsible? Will an understanding of competition theory benefit students and coaches? Are there specific types of people that thrive on competition? Colleges have taken pride in their forensic programs, and hopefully a better understanding of competition and its effects on forensics will serve to enhance that quality even further.

Works Cited

Clifford, Margaret M. "Motivational Effects of Competition and Goal-Setting in Reward and Nonreward Conditions." Journal of Experimental Education 39.3 (1971): 11-16.

Deci, Edward L., Gregory Betley, James Kahle, Linda Abrams, and Joseph Porac. "When Trying to Win: Competition and Intrinsic Motivation." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 7.1 (March 1981): 79-83.

Gurnee, Herbert. "Learning Under Competitive and Collaborative Sets.: Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 4 (1968): 26-34.

Holloway, Hal. "An Intercollegiate Competitive Public Speaking Program: Establishing a Forensic Group to Foster Training in Speech." College Student Journal 16.2 (Summer 1982): 166-69.

Johnson, David W., and Roger T. Johnson. "Instructional Goal Structure: Cooperative, Competitive, or Individualistic." Review of Educational Research 44.2 (1974): 213-40.

---. Learning Together and Alone: Cooperation, Competition, and Individualization. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1975.

O'Connell, Edward J., Jr. "Effect of Cooperative and Competitive Set on the Learning of Imitation." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 1 (1965): 172-83.

Rosenbaum, Milton E., Danny L. Moore, John L. Cotton, Michael

S. Cook, Rex A. Hieser, M. Nicki Shovar, and Morris J. Gray. "Group Productivity and Process: Pure and Mixed Reward Structures and Task Interdependence." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 39.4 (Oct. 1980): 626-42.

Scott, W.E., Jr., and David J. Cherrington. "Effects of Competitive, Cooperative and Individualistic Reinforcement Contingencies." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 30 (1974): 748-58.

Shaw, Marvin E. "Some Motivational Factors in Cooperation and Competition." Journal of Personality 26 (1958): 155-69.

Steigleder, Michele K., Robert Frank Weiss, Robert Ervin Cramar, and Richard A. Feinberg. "The Motivating and Reinforcing Functions of Competitive Behavior." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 36 (1978): 1291-1301.

Walker, Stuart H. Winning: The Psychology of Competition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980.